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CENTRAL INTELLIGENCE AGENCY  
OFFICE OF NATIONAL ESTIMATES

2 August 1955

STAFF MEMORANDUM NO. 42-55

SUBJECT: New Soviet Thinking on Importance of Strategic Surprise

1. At a recent conference of writers dealing with military subjects, in which the Ministry of Defense participated, public requests were made for less censorship of military writing, more accuracy in reporting, emphasis upon better biographies of prominent military leaders, and a revision of the "Stalinist" versions of military history and strategic military doctrines which developed during World War II. Apparently related to this openly revealed desire for greater accuracy and realism in the consideration of military problems, there has appeared, along with general consideration of nuclear war, a discussion of the element of surprise in Soviet military doctrine. This probably stems from a desire on the part of Soviet military strategists to modify the doctrine of "active defense" as propagated by the "leader of genius" Stalin, which relegated surprise to a transitory role.

2. During the pre-WW II period the Soviets had not clearly enumerated any "principles of war" -- as had the western nations in their strategic military doctrines. It was apparently taken for granted that there were certain basic principles, but their specific composition was still being debated. Among the "principles" under discussion was the concept of surprise. Prewar Field Regulations stated that "the most important condition of success of an offensive is surprise of the enemy," and General Tactics reiterated -- "surprise of the blow is the most important guarantee of success." However, as these principles were finally enumerated during World War II and in the postwar period "surprise" did not emerge as one of the five "permanently operating factors" ("the stability of the rear, the morale of the army, the quantity and quality of divisions, the armament of the army, and the organizing ability of the command personnel"). Rather it became a "transitory factor" -- and was contrasted with the "permanently operating factors." This doctrinal

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development may have been due, in part, to the necessity for explaining away the strategic surprise achieved by the Germans in 1941, and of presenting Soviet military reaction thereto, including Stalin's leadership, in a favorable context. The strategy of "active defense," incorporating the "constantly operating factors" became the accepted strategic doctrine, and it was emphasized that surprise, while of great importance tactically, was not a decisive strategic factor. Stalin in November 1941 stated: "The outcome of the war will be decided not by such a fortuitous element as surprise, but by the permanently operating factors."

3. While surprise was thus treated as a secondary factor in Soviet strategic doctrine, it was by no means neglected. It was emphasized in tactical operations as a "transitory factor" which could be widely utilized. Indeed, in some instances it was not even confined to the tactical level, but became strategic surprise used in conjunction with the permanently operating factors. In 1946 it was stated by one Soviet strategist that "surprise, the unexpected descent on the foe, has always been considered a necessary condition of success."

4. The advent of the nuclear age is forcing upon all countries the task of revising military doctrines to take account of new long-range weapon systems and mass-destruction weapons, which have given a new and vital importance to achieving initial strategic surprise. While it is conceivable that until Stalin's death his doctrines were still supported in fact as well as in official publications, the new developments in warfare must have had a growing impact upon Soviet strategic thinking, as they have had in other major military powers. Certainly the Soviets' own development of nuclear weapons and a long-range air delivery capability have impressed upon them, if US developments had not previously done so, the power, destructiveness, and possibly decisive character of these new weapons, and hence the conceivably outmoded nature of their own official strategic doctrines. The conservative natures of the Soviet military leadership (as inferred in large part from the continued predominance of ground force generals in the Soviet military hierarchy) and the extent of Soviet conventional superiority in Eurasia may have led to Soviet caution in revising strategic doctrines, but the fact that the USSR is itself placing increasing emphasis on long-range mass-destruction weapons systems indicates that a parallel modification in doctrines and concepts must be underway.

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5. Moreover, recent public statements by Soviet military leaders indicate a reappraisal of basic strategic doctrine, even though we have no firm evidence to support a conclusion that surprise has, in fact, become a sixth "permanently operating factor" or that the Soviets have adopted a preventive war doctrine as some have claimed. However, these statements do indicate a recognition of the necessity of studying and learning from "bourgeois" military doctrines, and also a growing recognition of the impact of nuclear war upon strategic doctrine. Vigilance against enemy surprise attack has become virtually a standard line in public military statements. In addition, various veiled references have been made to surprise attack in such manner as to have led to speculation concerning possible changes in Soviet strategic doctrine.

6. In Red Star of 24 March 1955 Marshal Rotmistrov contributed an editorial, "For a creative elaboration of Soviet Military Science," in which he deplored the over-emphasis upon "active defense" and the "constantly operating factors," and called for more consideration of the significance of surprise attack -- emphasizing that a surprise nuclear attack could determine the outcome of a war, and that Soviet military policy must be such as "not to permit" such an attack to take place. He stopped short, however, of proposing specific counter-measures.

7. Marshal Bagramyan, on 13 May in "October" and Lt.-Gen. Shatilov, on 28 May in "Literary Gazette," pursued the argument somewhat further. Bagramyan wrote of "the holy duty of the Soviet armed forces to nip in the bud any striving of the aggressors to carry out a surprise attack," and Shatilov, avoiding any reference to who might be the aggressor, asserted that "atomic weapons as well as suddenness of attack are double-edged weapons." The use of such terms by Bagramyan and Shatilov may simply reflect a greater awareness of the dangers of a surprise nuclear attack, derived from their own developing capabilities, and a desire to reassure themselves and convince the West that they are prepared for any eventuality. They may even reflect, in the context of a reappraisal of Soviet military doctrine in the nuclear age, an advocacy of preventive attack.

8. They may also represent the external manifestations of personal or group struggles for ascendancy in progress within the military hierarchy. Public statements such as these, at variance with accepted doctrines, have characteristically reflected either significant doctrinal changes, personal struggles, or both. There

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is no firm evidence as to who might be opposing whom if a personal struggle is behind the discussion of "surprise," but there has been considerable speculation about rivalry between Zhukov and Konev, to whom varying positions on military strategy have been attributed. Zhukov is said to be more of a realist in his approach to the world strategic situation, and has recently (10 February) commented upon the possibility of over-rating the value of aircraft, and the necessity of correlating the various military arms rather than stressing the value of one over the other. Zhukov is also said to accept the Malenkov theory, now officially discredited, that atomic war would mean the destruction of civilization. Konev, said to be more of a Party adherent than Zhukov, has frequently reiterated the official Party line on the "destruction of capitalism" in World War III, has appeared to be more bellicose, and has publicly lauded Khrushchev as a wartime leader. It is thus conceivable that the statements made by Bagramyan and Shatilov reflect the strategic thinking of a group headed by Konev, while Rotmistrov, and more particularly, Col.-Gen. Zheltov, who, on 7 May in "Communist," re-emphasized the importance of the "constantly operating factors," may reflect the strategic concepts of a somewhat more conservative group headed by Zhukov. Conjecture that this discussion may have political overtones is perhaps supported by the fact the Zheltov and Shatilov are Chief and Deputy Chief, respectively, of the Main Political Administration of The Ministry of Defense.

9. Summary -- In any event it appears that, spurred by a growing awareness of the character of nuclear war, a fairly comprehensive reappraisal and discussion of Soviet strategic doctrine is in progress, centering upon the element of surprise. While there is no evidence of a final resolution of these discussions, there is abundant evidence that the factor of surprise is receiving greatly increased weight. It may even be that the USSR is veering toward a strategy of preventive attack, in event of what appeared to be impending war. It is also possible that this discussion reflects significant personal differences among groups within the political-military hierarchy. More likely, many of these statements mentioned above reflect the personal opinion of the author rather than the coordinated opinion of a significant group, and those senior officers desiring to re-examine traditional Stalinist military doctrine are probably simply taking advantage of this present opportunity to express themselves.

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